

Pearson Country School

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I have been asked to recall a few of my memories as a student at Pearson School, a one-room school house a couple miles north of Fairbury. My recollections are hard to separate from family memories since my four brothers also attended Pearson from first through eighth grades and sat at desks near by own.

The daily chore of getting to and from school comes to mind first. We lived on the opposite side of the section from Pearson and walked to school every day. In the winter, but cutting across the plowed fields, we were able to cut our trip in half. While in the lower grades, my younger brother and I had a difficult time keeping up with the three older ones. We'd stumble over the big frozen clods, fall on our knees, cry some, but had no choice but to get up and plod on. I was always glad when spring arrived and we could no longer cut across that big field.

I specifically remember an exceptionally bad snowstorm that started during the school day when I was in fourth grade. My two older brother were already in high school so they weren't there to help us younger ones get home through the storm. To our great surprise and relief, my dad arrived just in time to walk we three young kids home. He had us all hold hands so we wouldn't get separated from each other. Seems like it doesn't snow like that anymore.

My teachers through my eight years were Vera Winslow Hoffman, Miss Hanley, Josephine Keeley, and Clara Bauman. They were all excellent and following in their footsteps was of interest to me from my earliest school days. I remember how the older students when they got their work done, would help the younger ones. They'd pronounce spelling words to us or do math problems on the board. Early on, I loved being helped—then couldn't wait to be the helper as I got older. Only six years after graduating from Pearson, I was teaching in my own one-room school house at nearby Avoca School.

Each year, on average, there were 12-15 kids spread over the eight grades. From first through sixth grades, Johnny Kaeb and I were the only ones at the same grade level. I finished seventh and eighth grade alone. I missed him—it just wasn't as interesting or as much fun to be alone in class. I never saw Johnny again until just a few years ago at a funeral. I'd never have known him if someone hadn't brought him to my attention.

Eighth grade for everyone was the most exciting time. All eighth graders were required to take an examination, testing whether they were ready to be promoted into high school. Graduation was a huge event because the commencement exercises was held at the Chautauqua Park in Pontiac for all the eighth graders in the region. Unfortunately, by the time it was my turn, the Depression had started and the school board budget was cut way back. After looking forward to this event for years and watching my three older brother graduate, I received my diploma in the mail.

As much as I enjoyed my hours inside the school, our school world outside had magical appeal. Like all kids, I loved the word "Recess." I remember one year one of the older boys rode his bicycle to school. He was generous with his bike and had lots of patience. If a student didn't already know how to ride, he or she did by the end of that year. We would take turns practicing on the road in front of the school. We didn't worry about cars or other traffic like we do now. We also played a lot of softball and Andy High Over, a special game suitable only for a one-story schoolhouse. We split into two teams and hit a rubber ball over the roof of the school...a kind of volleyball with the school building as the "net." It was really fun and instilled a great sense of team work in us. Even our teachers played.

Two big events each year included the whole community--the Christmas program and the year-end track meet. Both events hold some of my very best memories. As a little girl who had no choice but to become a tomboy in order to keep up with her brothers, I particularly remember the fun of the track meets. Several nearby schools would come together to take part. Most of the parents, a lot of the surrounding neighbors, whether they had children in school or not, and family guests gathered for a huge picnic and to cheer their favorite Pearson sports celebrity to the finish line. When the outside events concluded, we'd go back inside and have dictionary races or recite pieces that we'd memorized. The fathers would help with the outside events and the mothers with the inside ones. We were awarded blue, red, and white ribbons for the first three places. I still have in my childhood scrapbook for my running and high-jump winnings.

By the end of the 1930's as school districts consolidated further and buses were purchased, the country schools began to close. Some were remodeled for housing and many were torn down, but Pearson School was bought by Neal Hanley, a local lawyer, and turned into a large tool shed for his farm implements. He owned the farmland surrounding the school; being able to use the building in this way was a great convenience to his renter. He changed the front of the schoolhouse a bit, put a huge door on the east side, and covered or removed all the windows. Even though I hated to see this happen, I'm so glad Pearson wasn't torn down. I still love to drive by it on occasion and let my cherished memories roll on and on. Best of all, my children and grandchildren like to drive by as well and reach back through the years to touch this era of "old-fashioned" education through my reminiscences. We all know that I was very fortunate to have been a student at Pearson School.